

## MARLON RIGGS REMEMBERED

By Patricia A. Turner

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To those in his immediate circle, the death of documentary filmmaker, teacher, poet, and essayist Marlon Riggs in early 1994 came as no real surprise. The HIV virus and its incipient partners had been mauling his body for some time.

As a friend and a member of the board of directors of Signifyin' Works, the nonprofit corporation organized to produce and disseminate Riggs' projects, I was well aware that his death would be newsworthy. As I anticipated, most obituaries summed up his life by highlighting the controversy some aspects of his work stirred. Time and again, the focus was on Riggs as the object of the wrath of notable right-wing conservatives who used his work to fuel their ignoble campaigns against public funding for the arts and the humanities. For example, *People* magazine summed up his passing in one sentence: "Emmy-winning filmmaker Marlon Riggs, 37, whose publicly funded 1989 documentary about gay black men, *Tongues Untied*, was condemned as pornography by conservative Pat Buchanan during the 1992 presidential primaries, died of AIDS April 4 in Oakland, Calif."

It pains me to see his luminous career reduced to a historical moment orchestrated by those who sought to suppress his voice and deny him access to support. Marlon Riggs deserves to be remembered as much more than the



Marlon Riggs

filmmaker condemned and plagiarized by Patrick Buchanan.

Marlon Riggs made breaking silences the keystone of his creative activity. He focused on the previously unheralded accomplishments of African Americans as well as the pernicious assaults they were forced to endure. He documented and celebrated the blues music scene in Oakland with his first film *Long Train Running: The Story of the Oakland Blues Project* (1982). Winning an American Film Institute Award for best student film, it signaled to the world a new young troubadour who was determined to be heard.

The *People* magazine obituary neglects to mention the documentary for which Riggs was awarded his national Emmy. Indeed the Emmy was just one of many awards Riggs received for his first feature length documentary, *Ethnic Notions*. A gallery exhibition devoted to over a

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century's worth of racist iconography inspired Riggs to make a film devoted to the history and impact of anti-black caricatures in popular culture. At first, many did not want to hear what he had learned about the scope and impact of a vast range of derogatory mass-produced anti-black artifacts. Securing funding for that documentary proved to be a daunting task. Many representatives of funding agencies discouraged him from submitting applications. Ever tenacious, Riggs presented them in spite of the warnings. To its credit, the California Council for the Humanities (CCH) was one of the first agencies to offer support for his efforts.

Still, it took five years for Riggs to amass the needed financial resources. After receiving several prizes on the film festival circuit, *Ethnic Notions* was broadcast on PBS. The celebrated documentary has stood the test of time. Each year, new audiences discover it in college classes, film festivals, anti-racism seminars, and assorted other venues.

As many of the obituaries suggested, *Tongues Untied* garnered Riggs more acclaim and abuse than all of his other works put together. Here Riggs' goal was to give stature and identity to the previously muted voices of black gay men. Often ostracized by African-American heterosexuals and fetishized by white gay men, these individuals were placed at the margins of the marginalized. To tell these stories, Riggs took a profound personal and professional risk. He infused the film with vignettes from his life. Using verse, dance, and prose, he constructed a deeply artistic, moving film. Many reviewers likened the final product to a video poem.

Like *Ethnic Notions*, *Tongues Untied* first enjoyed a healthy run

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# Network

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## NATIONAL ARTS AND HUMANITIES MONTH

The second annual nationwide celebration of the humanities and the arts will be held throughout the month of October. To mark the occasion, a rich variety of humanities programs and events has been planned all over California. Events include "The Journey of the *Frolic* Symposium" in Fort Bragg and Ukiah, the culminating programs of the Smithsonian Institution's "Many Cultures - One Nation" series in San Francisco and Los Angeles, and "The Other California" lectures and discussions in Visalia. Other programs of interest are listed in the Humanities Calendar on pages six and seven of this newsletter.



National Arts  
and Humanities  
Month

October

Please also check with your local museums, historical societies, libraries, and colleges and universities - and join the national celebration of human cultures, histories, and values during the month of October.

The California Council for the Humanities is a state-based affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Humanities Network is published quarterly and mailed to anyone who requests it from the San Francisco office.



## MARLON RIGGS: Continued

on the film and video festival circuit. Impressed by Riggs' superb craftsmanship and the film's honest and moving vision, the producers of the public television documentary series "POV" urged Riggs to submit it for nationwide broadcast. After receiving assurances that it would be broadcast in its original form, Riggs agreed to enter it, and "POV" decided to broadcast it. The very scheduling of a film about African-American homosexuals on television triggered outrage from conservative groups. As a result, close to half of all PBS affiliates declined to air it. *Tongues Untied* triggered many positive responses, but those that received the media play were negative. Opponents characterized it as pro-gay propaganda and attached to it every possible negative consequence of public funding for the arts. With characteristic dignity and humor, Marlon Riggs unapologetically entered the fray, refusing to be silenced.

*Color Adjustment*, Riggs' next major film, traced the history of African Americans on prime time television. The Peabody award-winning film begins in the 1950s, when television producers rarely incorporated black characters into their programming, and proceeds until the early 1990s, when the numbers were better but the range of black depictions was still woefully limited and often caricatured. Riggs uses the provocative testimony of several African-American actors and actresses to punctuate the sequences clipped from three decades worth of prime time television programming.

Widely acclaimed, *Color Adjustment* proved to be much more than a study of black images on television; rather it has come to be considered a competent examina-

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tion of the first thirty years of television, using the portrayals of African Americans as a case study.

Riggs took on both black and white opponents. In addition to answering the attacks hurled by right-wing spokesmen such as Donald Wildmon, Patrick Buchanan, Robert Dole, and Jesse Helms, he also confronted African-American notables such as Eddie Murphy, Spike Lee, and Bill Cosby. In *Tongues Untied*, he draws attention to Murphy's blatantly homophobic nightclub routines. When fellow filmmaker Spike Lee addressed a worshipful crowd at Berkeley's Zellerbach Theatre, Riggs asked him to justify the sexism and homophobia evident in his films. Although Cosby refused to be interviewed for *Color Adjustment*, he very quickly contacted Riggs after seeing a print of the documentary. Riggs reminded him that for several months he had endeavored to give Cosby the opportunity to speak his piece on camera.

First and foremost, Marlon Riggs was a teacher. Eager to reach a student body beyond the confines of a single campus, he made his "lesson plans" available for broadcast. Riggs the film-

maker conceived of his films and videos as tools for Riggs the teacher. As a member of the faculty of the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, he trained aspiring young film and television producers so that they too could harness the technology required to reach large audiences.

Riggs died a few precious months short of completing his final film, *Black Is...Black Ain't*. As its title suggests, this experimental film probes the issues underlying historical and contemporary debates about black identity and power. In some respects, *Black Is* "outs" hidden disputes that often turn blacks against each other. Riggs began working on the project immediately following the release of *Color Adjustment* in 1990. As usual, he didn't make it easy on himself. He maintained his standard UC Berkeley teaching load, took on public speaking assignments, and continued his creative writing. All the while fighting the encroaching HIV virus. As the illness intensified, the tenor of the film changed. Riggs' own story, the tale of an AIDS-stricken artist trying to finish his last film, has been



Photo by Debbie vanBlankenship/UCD Illustration Services

Patricia A. Turner is author of *I Heard It Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture* (UC Press, 1993) and *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (forthcoming, Anchor Books, 1994).

incorporated into the documentary, scheduled to be released before the end of the year.

At the packed Berkeley memorial service for Riggs, Pulitzer prize-winning author Alice Walker described one of her last visits to his hospital room. Tired and uncomfortable, Riggs asked her to rub his feet. She did so until he fell asleep. She told the mourners that Riggs had given her a gift – that we should all be given the opportunity to rub the feet of those who stand for us.

Marlon Riggs should be remembered as a talented and tireless artist whose own personal and professional spirit inspired courage in others.

## “ETHNIC NOTIONS” AND “COLOR ADJUSTMENT” IN FILM & SPEAKER PROGRAM



From "Ethnic Notions," Marlon Riggs' film examining the history of racist stereotypes in America. Photo courtesy of California Newsreel.

Two of Marlon Riggs' award-winning film documentaries are included in the California Council for the Humanities' Film & Speaker minigrant program.

*Ethnic Notions* takes the viewer on a disturbing voyage through American cultural history, tracing the development of deeply rooted stereotypes that have fueled anti-black prejudice. Narrated by actress Esther Rolle, the film explores how familiar stereotypes – loyal Toms, carefree Sambos, faithful Mammies, and wide-eyed Pickaninnies, for example – served the dominant society's shifting needs to justify black oppression, and how these dehumanizing portrayals continue to exact a high toll on the African-American psyche.

*Color Adjustment* examines images of African Americans as seen through the lens of prime time television entertainment, which

plays an ever-expanding role in defining the American Dream. The film reveals how deep-seated racial conflict has been absorbed into familiar, non-threatening formats of television series, from early shows like *Amos 'n Andy* that presented a segregated black society – which could parody but never equal white society – to recent shows that portray successful, assimilated black Americans.

*Ethnic Notions* and *Color Adjustment* are two of the thirty-six films in the CCH Film & Speaker program. Through this program, CCH awards a small grant to a non-profit organization to rent and screen one of the films, followed by a scholar-led discussion of the humanities issues and themes explored in the film.

For additional information about the Film & Speaker minigrant program, contact Stan Yogi at 415/391-1474.



# Grants Awarded

## PUBLIC PROGRAMS

### The Other California: Explorations of Identity and Place in the Southern San Joaquin Valley

Sponsor: The College of the Sequoias, Visalia  
Project Directors: Nancy Finney, Donno Orozco, and Rob Honsen

Amount of Award: \$12,500 in outright funds and \$2,100 in matching funds if \$4,200 is raised in outside gifts

In nine lecture/discussions at the College of the Sequoias in Visalia, this project will focus on the history, culture and geography of the southern San Joaquin Valley. Plans call for speakers also to participate in secondary presentations in rural communities throughout the Tulare Lake Basin. Programs begin in August.

### The Reign in Spain: History, Music & Literature of the Age of Discovery

Sponsor: The San Francisco Consort  
Project Director: Lee McRae

Amount of Award: \$11,695 in outright funds

This award supports five lecture/concerts exploring the music and literature of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spain. Pairing musical demonstrations and excerpts from historical and literary texts of the period with insights of modern scholars, the project will illuminate the period known as the "Golden Age" of Spain. Participants will also examine the darker legacy of the period, which included the brutal colonization of the New World and a program of dispossession of Jewish and Muslim estates that prefigured twentieth-century movements of religious and ethnic cleansing. Programs begin in October.

## THE OTHER CALIFORNIA "CALIFORNIA HEARTLAND" SERIES

The Other California project's "California Heartland" lecture/discussion series at the College of the Sequoias (COS) in Visalia will explore the people, issues and sense of place in the southern San Joaquin Valley. The programs take place on nine consecutive Wednesday nights



beginning in August. Programs begin at 7:30 p.m. All programs will be held in the COS Theater except for the concluding panel discussion, which will be held in the COS Lecture Hall. For more information, please contact the COS Public Information Office at 209/730-3770.

**Aug. 24** "Home Valley: Reflections of a Native Son" by Gerald Haslam, author of *The Great Central Valley: California's Heartland* and *That Constant Coyote: California Stories*.

**Aug. 31** "Tulare Lake: A Float Trip Through Time" by Rob Hansen, instructor of ecology and zoology, College of the Sequoias.

**Sept. 7** "Voices from the Heartland: Writers and Writing for the Great Valley" by James D. Houston, author of *Californians: Searching for the Golden State*, *Farewell to Manzanar*, and *Continental Drift*.

**Sept. 14** "The Vanishing Landscape of the Tulare Lake Basin" by William Preston, professor of geography at Cal Poly and author of *Vanishing Landscapes: Land and Life in the Tulare Lake Basin*.

**Sept. 21** "Managing Farmland to Bring Back Wildlife" by John Anderson, associate veterinarian at UC Davis and owner/manager of Hedgerow Farms.

**Sept. 28** "Traditional Yokuts Life in the 1850s: An Eyewitness Account" by Malcolm Margolin, author of *The Ohlone Way: Indian Life in the San Francisco - Monterey Bay Area* and publisher of "News from Native California" and Heyday Books.

**Oct. 5** "Drought, Farms, People, Fish: California's Hydrologic Minefield" by Marc Reisner, author of *Cadillac Desert*.

**Oct. 12** "A Rose of Varied Hues: A History of Mexican Women in the Valley" by Lea Ybarra, assistant to the president at CSU Fresno.

**Oct. 19** "Generation, Community and Class: The Clash of Cultures," a panel discussion with David Mas Masumoto, farmer and author of *Country Voices: The Oral History of a Japanese American Farm Community*; Robert Urtecho, instructor of botany, COS; Cecelia Maldonado, COS associate dean; and Pajhoua Her, director of the Asian-American Women's Advancement Coalition.

### Labyrinth of Exile: Impressions and Images of the Persian Diaspora

Sponsor: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History  
Project Director: Dr. Christopher B. Donnon

Amount of Award: \$11,700 in outright funds and \$1,500 in matching funds if \$3,000 is raised in outside gifts

Since Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution forced hundreds of thousands of Iranians into exile, nearly a quarter million Iranians - including some of that country's most outspoken writers, artists and cultural figures - have settled in California. This project, held in conjunction with a major exhibition and festival focusing on Iranian immigration and culture in Los Angeles, consists of a workshop for teachers and the general public and two public symposia designed to explore themes of displacement, nationalism, and westernization, as well as the relationship between Persian literary traditions and the poetry and prose of modern Iranian exiles. Programs will be held at the Fowler Museum in October and November.



"Labyrinth of Exile" symposia, held in conjunction with the "Iranageles" exhibit at UCLA's Fowler Museum, examine the arts and culture of Iranians in Los Angeles. Photo by Ron Kelley.

### Four Hands Weaving: Basketry of San Diego's Indigenous Peoples

Sponsor: American Indian Studies Department, Polomar College, San Marcos  
Project Director: James M. Borker

Amount of Award: \$12,492 in outright funds  
Intimately tied to natural habitats and shaped by differing local traditions of motif and iconography, basketry is a primary, and often misunderstood, Native-American art form. Through exhibits, workshops, and a symposium, this project will document and explore the ongoing basket traditions of the four indigenous cultures represented in San Diego County. Programs begin in March 1995.

### Border Voices II: A Multicultural Poetry Fair and Community Outreach Program for the Humanities in San Diego

Sponsor: San Diego State University MFA Program, Department of English

Project Directors: Glover Davis and J.F. Webb

Amount of Award: \$9,000 in outright funds  
This grant supports a multicultural poetry fair to be held in San Diego's Balboa Park on March 10 and 11, 1995. The fair includes readings, panels, and a series of workshops featuring humanities scholars and such poets as Gary Snyder, Ai, and Juan Felipe Herera. The fair is part of a larger poetry project which brings poets and poetry to the public schools and to other public venues in San Diego.



# Grants Awarded

## MEDIA PROJECTS

### SCRIPTS

#### **Yield to Total Elation: The Life and Work of Achilles Rizzoli**

*Sponsor: Hearts and Hands Media Arts, San Francisco*

*Project Director: Pat Ferrero*

*Amount of Award: \$10,000 in outright funds*

In 1990, a collection of elaborate ink drawings, novels, and hand-lettered vellum sheets combining poetry, commentary and drawings were discovered in San Francisco. They were the work of Achilles G. Rizzoli (1896-1981), son of Italian-Swiss immigrants, a lifelong bachelor, and an architectural draftsman who worked quietly for decades at a San Francisco design firm while engaged in a secret effort to record and interpret the hallucinations he experienced. This script for a half-hour film will depict the life and work of Rizzoli, focusing on three themes: the distinction between inspiration and madness, the artist as visionary, and the role of the working-class artisan in the era of mass culture.

#### **Memories from the Women of World War II**

*Sponsor: International Documentary Association, Los Angeles*

*Project Director: Ellen L. Shepard*

*Amount of Award: \$10,000 in outright funds*

Based on the recollections of women from all over the world, this script for a two-hour television documentary will explore the contributions women made to their nations' war efforts during World War II, as well as the ethical, social and political choices women in different countries were forced or allowed to make as a result of the war.

#### **Blacks and Jews: Ambivalent Allies**

*Sponsor: Snitow/Kaufman Productions, Berkeley*  
*Project Directors: Deborah Kaufman, Bari Scott, Alan Snitow*

*Amount of Award: \$10,000 in outright funds*

This script for a one-hour documentary video will investigate the historical relationship between African Americans and American Jews, focusing on such issues as the diversity of views and experiences within each community, a shared secular culture, the relationships between black and Jewish leaders during the Civil Rights era, and the causes of the recent breakdown in cultural and political relationships.

#### **Our Music: A History of the 5/4 Ballroom**

*Sponsor: 5/4 Cultural Center, Los Angeles*

*Project Director: Diane Heller*

*Amount of Award: \$9,858 in outright funds*

Built in 1922 at the corner of 54th and Broadway in L.A., the 5/4 Ballroom became a center for African-American music. This script project for a one-hour video documentary will investigate the history and survival of this cultural institution from its opening as a Los Angeles version of the Cotton Club, where black artists and musicians performed for whites-only audiences, to its current incarnation as a cultural center for resident and visiting artists.



*"Mother Symbolically Recaptured The Cathedral," a 1937 drawing by Achilles G. Rizzoli. Rizzoli is the subject of the documentary film project "Yield to Total Elation." Photo courtesy of The Ames Gallery, Berkeley, CA.*

#### **Only a Teacher: A History of the American Teacher**

*Sponsor: Smith College Project on Women and Social Change, Northampton, MA*

*Project Director: Susan Bourque & Claudia Levin*

*Amount of Award: \$6,150 in outright funds*

This award supports the development of scripts for a three-part television documentary film that will consider the history and significance of the American teacher in the nation's educational system and in society as a whole. Arranged chronologically and spanning a period from the 1830s to the 1970s, the one-hour segments will focus on three recurring themes: the teacher as moral exemplar, as agent of democracy, and as agent of social change.

#### **Code Status: The Ethics of Resuscitation**

*Sponsor: Film Arts Foundation, San Francisco*

*Project Director: Maren R. Monsen, M.D.*

*Amount of Award: \$9,970 in outright funds*

Using case histories from California's emergency rooms as a focus, this script for a television documentary will examine the complex issues that underlie the ethics of resuscitation. The project will include perspectives from physicians and other health care providers, patients and families of people who have been resuscitated, elderly people facing decisions regarding resuscitation, and scholars in the fields of ethics, religion, philosophy, law and the history of science.

#### **Beyond Affliction**

*Sponsor: Straight Ahead Pictures, Inc., Conway, MA*

*Project Director: Laurie Block*

*Amount of Award: \$10,000 in outright funds and \$5,080 in matching funds if \$10,160 is raised in outside gifts*

This award supports script development for the fourth and final segment of a multipart television documentary series on the cultural history of people with disabilities in the United States. The final one-hour segment will investigate the origins, implementation, and proliferation of "Independent Living" centers and programs. Central to the story is the career of Ed Roberts, founder of the Berkeley Center for Independent Living, and the work of California native Jacobus tenBroek, a constitutional law scholar and founder of the National Federation of the Blind.

#### **Oh What a Time**

*Sponsor: The Public Media Foundation, Boston, MA*

*Project Director: Roger House*

*Amount of Award: \$10,000 in outright funds*

This award supports script development for six half-hour radio documentary programs focusing on African-American urban life during the 1940s. Combining music, poetry, and oral history, the programs will examine the experiences of African Americans in six U.S. cities – Richmond, Ca., Atlanta, Chicago, Boston, New York and Cleveland – during a time when blacks migrated in large numbers to cities in the North and West from the rural South and contributed to an emerging black middle class, a new, more assertive quest for civil rights, and an increasingly powerful national political leadership.



# Grants Awarded

## Robert Louis Stevenson's California

Sponsor: The Film History Foundation, San Francisco

Project Director: James S. Culp

Amount of Award: \$10,000 in outright funds

Robert Louis Stevenson, one of the most widely read authors in the English language, arrived in California in 1879 after an arduous twelve-day railroad journey and, later, in works like *The Amateur Emigrant*, *The Old Pacific Capital*, *The Wrecker*, and *The Silverado Squatters*, depicted California at a significant time of its development. This script development project for a one-hour television documentary will draw on primary documents and important new scholarship about Stevenson to portray and assess the impact that California and America had on Stevenson's life and literary career.



Francis Marion "Borax" Smith, who developed Death Valley's vast deposits of borax, is one of the subjects of the "Shadows in the Valley of Death" project. Smith is shown here in a c.1907 photo courtesy of Ted Faye.

## Shadows in the Valley of Death

Sponsor: International Documentary Association, Los Angeles

Project Director: Ted Faye

Amount of Award: \$9,193 in outright funds

The lowest, the driest, and the hottest desert in the western hemisphere, Death Valley is not just a brutally real place but also a landscape of the American imagination. This script development project for a one-hour documentary film will explore the relationship between the myth and reality of Death Valley – and the impact this relationship has had on the desert environment – by investigating the lives of William Lewis Manly, who walked 250 miles through the desert to save his lost party of '49ers; "Death Valley Scotty," who for almost 50 years bilked rich investors with flamboyant tales of a secret gold mine in the valley; and Frances Marion "Borax" Smith, who exploited the real mineral wealth of the valley – borax – and in the process gave rise to one of its greatest icons – the twenty mule team.

## PRODUCTIONS

### Oaxa-California: From Fresno to Jaltepec

Sponsor: International Documentary Association, Los Angeles

Project Director: Trisha Ziff-Meyer

Amount of Award: \$16,800 in matching funds if \$33,600 is raised in outside gifts

This one-hour documentary film examines the myths and stereotypes about migration from Mexico by looking at the experiences and reflections of the Mejia family as they travel back and forth between their home in Fresno, California and the birthplace of Leo Mejia, the father, in Magdalena Jaltepec, Oaxaca. The production also seeks to explore the intricate exchange of traditions, values, language and ideas involved in migration, as well as the struggle of migrants to wend their ways between two competing value systems. A first screening of the film at the Fresno Art Museum is planned for October 21-23, 1994.

### Skin Deep

Sponsor: Iris Feminist Collective, Inc., Berkeley

Project Director: Frances Reid

Amount of Award: \$20,000 in matching funds if \$40,000 is raised in outside funds

This award supports the production of a one-hour documentary video exploring the cultural, historical, and philosophical context for the tensions among different racial and ethnic groups on today's college and university campuses. The video will focus on the efforts of a group of racially diverse college students as they attempt to understand the obstacles they must overcome to build successful multiracial communities.

### Herbert's Hippopotamus

Sponsor: Visual Arts Department, UC San Diego

Project Director: Paul Alexander Juutilainen

Amount of Award: \$10,000 in outright funds

This award supports the completion of a one-hour video documentary exploring the life and thought of German-born philosopher Herbert Marcuse during his years in San Diego. Known as the "Philosopher of the New Left" and as an intellectual father figure to the 1960s student movement, Marcuse also played a significant and controversial role in the intellectual and political life of San Diego. The project will use a blend of interviews, archival footage, and staged imagery to present Marcuse within the context of his times, as well as to portray the mythmaking glorification of the period and the contemporary nostalgia for the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s.

### The Fight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and the Farmworkers' Struggle

Sponsor: Paradigm Productions, Inc., San Francisco

Project Director: Rick Tejada-Flores

Amount of Award: \$20,000 in matching funds if \$40,000 is raised in outside gifts

Under charismatic leader Cesar Chavez, the United Farm Workers (UFW) achieved success by breaking with tradition and combining the lessons of the civil rights movement, labor activism, and Mexican American traditions and values. This grant supports the production of a one-hour television documentary that will explore the pivotal role played by the UFW in organizing the first successful union for farmworkers, creating the Chicano activism of the 1960s and 1970s, and involving millions of Americans in the struggle for social justice.



This photo from "The Fight in the Fields" shows members and supporters of the United Farmworkers Union during a mid-1970s protest march in Livingston, California against the Gallo Winery. Photo courtesy of Rick Tejada-Flores.



## SUMMER Calendar

The public humanities programs listed here received funding support from the California Council for the Humanities. Please note that dates and times should be confirmed with local sponsors. These listings are often provided to the Council well before final arrangements are made.

### EXHIBITS

**Through Aug. 18** "Audubon's Animals and Birds" is a California Exhibition Resources Alliance-sponsored (CERA) exhibit examining the work of John James Audubon as art and as statement about American and European attitudes toward the wilderness. At the Victor Valley Museum, 11873 Apple Valley Road, Apple Valley. For more information, please call 619/240-2111.

**Through Aug. 14** "Textile Diaries: Quilts as Cultural Markers" is a CERA-sponsored exhibit of quilts from the Kansas State Historical Society and the Kansas Quilt Project. At the Community Memorial Museum of Sutter County, 1333 Butte House Road, Yuba City. 916/741-7141 for more information.

**Through Aug. 31** "Before Stonewall: San Francisco's Gay and Lesbian Community on the Edge of Revolt" is an exhibit of material from the the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society chronicling the development of an activist gay and lesbian community in San Francisco between 1950 and 1969. At the Eureka Valley branch of the SF Public Library, 3555 16th Street. 415/626-0980 for more information.



"Barred Owl," a hand-colored lithograph by John James Audubon, is part of the "Audubon's Animals and Birds" exhibit at the the Victor Valley Museum in Apple Valley until August 18.

**Through Dec. 31** In complementary exhibits in Mendocino, Willits and Ukiah, the "Journey of the Frolic" project explores how an 1850 shipwreck on the Mendocino coast affected the transformation of the region into a complex, integrated, multicultural society. At Kelley House Museum, 45007 Albion Street, Mendocino; the Mendocino County Museum, 400 E. Commercial Street, Willits; and the Grace Hudson Museum, 431 S. Main Street, Ukiah. 707/459-2736 for more information.

### EVENTS

**Through Dec. 10** The "Writers of the Historic Wilshire Corridor" lectures series and discussion forums explore the literary life in Los Angeles between the world wars. For more information, see page nine in this newsletter.

**Aug. 1 - 21** "Filipino American Arts Exposition Humanities Symposia" is a series of panel discussions and weekend workshops focusing on the history, culture, art, politics and cultural identity of Filipinos in America. The symposia are being conducted at several Bay Area venues as part of the the Filipino American Arts Exposition (FAAE), the largest cultural exposition ever put on by the Filipino-American community. For more information, contact FAAE at 415/621-3223.

**Aug. 4** "Mythological Representations of the Healer: Religious Dimensions" is a lecture by Dr. Christine Downing, professor emerita of religious studies at San Diego State University, as part of the "Traditional Medicine and Healing" lecture series. 7 p.m. San Diego Museum of Man Recital Hall, 1350 El Prado, Balboa Park, San Diego. Call 619/239-2001 for more information.

**Aug. 5** "Tobacco and Traditional Shamanic Healing Among South American Indians" is a lecture by Dr. Johannes Wilbert, professor emeritus of anthropology at UCLA. It is the second lecture in the "Traditional Medicine and Healing" series. 7 p.m. San Diego Museum of Man Recital Hall, 1350 El Prado, Balboa Park, San Diego. 619/239-2001.

**Aug. 6** The "J.P. Harrington Conference" features two panel presentations/discussions examining native California languages and the work of linguist J.P. Harrington. 9 a.m. At Mission San Juan Capistrano. Contact Joyce Perry at 714/725-9755 for more information.



**Aug. 6** Jorie Graham, author of *End of Beauty* and *Region of Unlikeness*, will be the subject of this session of "Poets Today – Other Voices," a discussion series examining contemporary female American poets. Moderated by Daniel Kiefer, assistant professor of English at the University of Redlands. 1 p.m. At the Temecula Library Community Room. For more information, call 909/699-8807.

**Aug. 11** "The Artificial City: Concepts, Dreams, and Realities" lecture series features speaker June Wayne, artist, writer, and founder of the Tamarind Institute. The series examines the development of the urban environment in San Diego and Southern California. 7:30 p.m. At The Athenaeum, 1008 Wall Street, La Jolla. 619/454-5872.

**Aug. 24 - Oct. 19** "The Other California: California Heartland – People, Issues & A Sense of Place" is a nine-week speaker series focusing on the southern San Joaquin Valley and rural identity. To be held every Wednesday at the College of the Sequoias Theater. See page three for a listing of scheduled lecture/discussions.

**Sept. 27 - Nov. 1** "The Heritage of the Future" is one of the weekly reading-and-discussion groups in the YMCA's "Silver Editions" series. This group meets every Tuesday at 10 a.m. at the Central YMCA, 220 Golden Gate Ave., San Francisco. 415/885-0460 for more information.

**Sept. 20** "Matilda Joslyn Gage and the Iroquois" is a chautauqua performance in which historian Sally Roesch Wagner portrays the early suffragist and adopted member of the wolf clan of the Mohawk nation. At the Lodi Public Library, 201 West Locust Street, Lodi. Contact Robin Knowlton, Friends of Lodi Public Library. 209/368-8269.

**Oct. 1** "Family Life and Education in Vivaldi's Venice" is a presentation by Dr. Sally Scully, professor of history at San Francisco State University, which precedes a performance of "The Secret Life of Antonio Vivaldi." 7 p.m. At the Napa Arts Center, 101 S. Coombs Street, Napa. Call 707/252-8671 for more information.



From "Labyrinth of Exile" symposium (Oct. 16). Photo by Ron Kelley.

**Oct. 4 - Nov. 8** "The Search for Meaning" is one of the weekly reading-and-discussion groups in the YMCA's "Silver Editions" series. This group meets every Tuesday at 2 p.m. at the Marin YMCA, 1500 Los Gatos Drive, San Rafael. 415/492-9622 for more information.

**Oct. 5 - 9** "Many Cultures – One Nation," in San Francisco is a series of lectures, workshops, and panel discussions sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution and local cultural organizations in partnership with CCH and Wells Fargo Bank. The series focuses on themes of diversity and multiculturalism. For more information, call 202/287-3244.

**Oct. 5 - Nov. 9** "The Remembered Past: 1914-1945" is one of the weekly reading-and-discussion groups in the YMCA's "Silver Editions" series. This group meets every Wednesday at 10 a.m. at the Mission YMCA, 4080 Mission Street, San Francisco. 415/586-6900 for more information.

**Oct. 6 - Nov. 9** "In the Old Ways" is one of the weekly reading-and-discussion groups in the YMCA's "Silver Editions" series. This group meets every Thursday at 11 a.m. at the Richmond District YMCA, 360 18th Avenue, San Francisco. 415/668-2060 for more information.

**Oct. 11 - 16** "Many Cultures – One Nation," in Los Angeles, a series of programs sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution and local cultural organizations in partnership with CCH and Wells Fargo Bank, will feature a keynote address by Santiago Rodriguez, as well as lectures, workshops and panel discussions focusing on themes of diversity and multiculturalism. For more information, call 202/287-3244.

**Oct. 14 - 15** The "Journey of the Frolic Symposium" will examine the complex international histories and cultural encounters surrounding the wreck of the *Frolic*, a Baltimore clipper that was built to serve a Boston-based firm in the lucrative opium trade and that ran aground in 1850 on the Mendocino coast. At the College of the Redwoods in Fort Bragg on the evening of Friday, October 14 and at Mendocino College in Ukiah on Saturday, October 15. The symposium will also feature "Voices of the Frolic," dramatizations of historical figures from the *Frolic* story. For more information, contact the Grace Hudson Museum, Ukiah. 707/462-3370.

**Oct. 16** "Iranian Immigration: Voices and Images from Exile" is one of the "Labyrinth of Exile" symposia, sponsored by the Fowler Museum and the Center for Near Eastern Studies at UCLA. 1 p.m. At the Fowler Museum of Cultural History at UCLA. 405 Hilgard Avenue, Los Angeles. For more information, contact Jonathan Friedlander at 310/206-8631.

**Oct. 16-30** "The Reign in Spain: History, Music and Literature of the Age of Discovery" is a lecture/concert series examining the music of the "Golden Age" of Spain. At St. Mary's College, Moraga; College of the Pacific, Stockton; and CSU Fresno. Please call 510/848-5591 for exact times and locations.



The San Francisco Consort.

**Oct. 21-23** "Oaxa-California," a documentary film examining myths and stereotypes about migration from Mexico by looking at the experiences of the Mejia family of Fresno, will have its first public screenings throughout the weekend. At the Fresno Art Museum, 2233 N. First Street. Contact Diadre Metzler at 209/441-4221.

**Oct. 22** "The World, The Flesh, and The Devil: Dialogues on Science and the Humanities" is a symposium series featuring panels of scientists, humanists, and science fiction writers. The first meeting, tentatively scheduled for October 22, will be held simultaneously at the ALZA Corporation in Palo Alto (contact Ruth Gover, 415/496-8193) and Scripps Institute in La Jolla (contact Steve Henricksen, 619/554-7061). These dialogues focus on the topics of nature and society and art. Two other sessions will be held in November.



Objects recovered from the Frolic wreck site and Three Chop Village (a Pomo site excavated in 1984). A three-part exhibit (through Dec. 31) and symposium (Oct. 14 & 15) examine complex changes that resulted from the 1850 wreck of the *Frolic* on the Mendocino coast. Photo by Tom Linden, courtesy of the Grace Hudson Museum.



# CHESTER HIMES, THE FICTION OF EXCLUSION, AND LOS ANGELES' OTHER

Between the world wars, the 500-block area known as the Wilshire Corridor was the cultural, social, and economic center of Los Angeles. Its fashionable avenues and brightly colored neon lights attracted visitors from far and wide. It was frequented by some of the best-known literary figures of the period and became an important part of the setting for such novels as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* and Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*.

Timed to coincide with the restoration of vintage neon signs in the Wilshire Corridor, the "Writers of the Historic Wilshire Corridor" lecture series explores the literary life of Los Angeles in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. The lecture series and related discussion forums continue until the end of the year.

The following essay is an edited version of John N. Swift's May 14 lecture on Chester Himes. Swift is a professor of English and comparative literary studies and the associate dean of the faculty at Occidental College.

**W**hen he died in Spain in 1984, Chester Himes was best known for his crime fiction, the gritty stories of Harlem detectives Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones that he wrote as an expatriate in the 1950s and 1960s. His first two novels, however, were semi-autobiographical works of social protest, set in the political and racial fluidities of Los Angeles in the early 1940s.

I want to return to the first of these, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), and claim for Himes a place among the city's great mythographers: Nathanael West, Raymond Chandler, Thomas Pynchon, and Joan Didion, for example. Like them, Himes saw the forces of American history – particularly its dreams of Manifest Destiny – starkly allegorized in Los Angeles' physical and social landscapes. But as a black American, his relation to these forces was fundamentally skewed, and his peculiar situation led him to re-map the city's symbolic geography along axes unfamiliar to his Anglo counterparts.

## HARD-BOILED CYNICISM AND THE CALIFORNIA DREAM

Two related, convergent impulses joined in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. First, Himes was influenced early by Raymond Chandler and other writers of "hard-boiled" urban detective fiction, probably in part because the figure of the sardonic, world-weary private eye, moving between underworld and upper class, reflected some of his own unusual life.

In 1944, when he left Los Angeles at thirty-five for New York with the unfinished manuscript of *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, Himes had already been a bootlegger, a raccoon-coated collegian



Chester Himes

and fraternity brother, a convict, a successful short story writer and essayist, and a laborer. He drew on all of these to create the novel's narrator Bob Jones, a cynical romantic with a self-destructive taste for cars, liquor and women. And although he's neither Chandler's Philip Marlowe nor Himes' own later creation, Coffin Ed Johnson, Bob Jones, like them, acquires the pessimistic social vision that informs all hard-boiled fiction: a sad awareness that injustice and crime are systemic, institutional, and not the products of individual action.

These detectives inhabit a mean, disappointing, and deeply ironic world. Its "clues" lead not to clarity and correction, but only to recognition of more complicated corruptions. The hero is most fooled exactly at that moment when his vision seems clearest, the mystery solved, the way forward obvious. Thus, for example, Bob achieves a triumphant illumination near the novel's end, as his struggle to achieve stable identity apparently succeeds with a marriage proposal to Alice and an attempted last-resort identification with Los Angeles' black bourgeoisie:

We had a togetherness we felt nothing could destroy. We felt we'd gotten over the river Jordan into the promised land. Did you ever just know you were right? . . . It was one of those miracles. I was a different guy; didn't think the same; didn't feel the same. That was what it did for me. Set me up. Big tough world, but I got you beat now, I thought exultantly. *Peace, Father, it is truly wonderful.*

But there is neither "promised land" nor transformation. Two hours after his extravagant epiphany Bob is framed for rape, beaten nearly to death by a lynch mob, and jailed. On the next day (and on the novel's last page) he gives up Alice and respectability entirely. Forced to enlist, he disappears into the military – Himes's central fearful image of the system, the "big tough world" that can't be beaten.

His last crushing defeat concludes a series that Bob suffers as he spirals downward through the novel from strength to weakness, progressively losing his confidence and – in his terms – his "manhood."

This ironic progress directly reflects the second of the two impulses at work in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, a typically Angelino cultural disappointment that arose in the 1930s in the confrontation of California's Golden Dream and the Great Depression. It produced the disenchanted fictions whose form and style have been called "anti-mythic," or *noir*, works by Los Angeles authors beginning with James Cain and continuing through Didion and beyond, for whom the individual's essential powerlessness was the only bleak truth, arrived at over and over again.

Like Cain, Harold McCoy, West, Chandler, and his other immediate predecessors (and like most of their fictional characters and his own), Himes was a hopeful immigrant come west looking for steady work and an elusive personal renewal. In both searches he encountered mainly disillusionment, and along with the rest wrote it into a novel of failure and betrayal.

## BLACKER IRONIES

But with an important difference. Other great Los Angeles writers tended toward morbid metaphysics in defining their disappointment. Nathanael West, for instance, used his experience of Los Angeles as the basis for meditations on the grotesque comedy of life in death's dominion. Chandler took gloomy comfort in discovering death ("the big sleep" itself) as the final reality behind life's complicated corruptions. Others contemplating the collapse of the great American myth of the West elaborated in different ways on this essentially medieval theme.

But Himes, as a black writer, found his adversaries closer to hand. What threatens Bob Jones' power as an individual, his pleasure in his strong workingman's body – "rugged, bigger than the average citizen, stronger than a white-collar worker – stronger even than an executive" – is not mortality, but American society itself, as he realizes after his arrest:

I was scared in a different way. Not of the violence. Not of the mob. Not of physical hurt. But of America, of American justice. The jury and the judge. The people themselves. Of the inexorability of one conclusion—that I was guilty. In that one brief flash I could see myself trying to prove my innocence and nobody believing it. A white woman yelling, 'Rape,' and a Negro caught locked in the room. The whole structure of American thought was against me; American tradition had convicted me a hundred years before. And standing there in an American courtroom, through all the phoney formality of an American trial, having to take it, knowing that I was innocent and that I didn't have a chance.

The Epicureanism that Chandler assigns to Philip Marlowe, like the aesthetic detachment with which West characterizes Tod Hackett, is founded in a democratic, egalitarian vision of death, the great leveler, in whose face all actions are equally pointless. But, as Himes knew, such fatalism is in fact available only to one convinced of his own free agency in *this* world; despite its apparent universality, it belongs to a particular class position or degree of empowerment. To put it simply, freedom – the freedom to eat, drink, and be merry (or just philosophical) in anticipation of tomorrow's death – is unevenly distributed.

For Bob Jones, whose daily experience of racism reveals to him exactly his lack of freedom, the typical Los Angeles hero's posture of ironic disdain is finally impossible, since his society's institutions themselves won't leave him alone. "If you couldn't swing down Hollywood Boulevard and know that you belonged," he thinks; "if you couldn't make a polite pass at Lana Turner at Ciro's without having the gendarmes beat the black off you for getting out of



# GEOGRAPHY OF DESIRE

*Himes, like other black immigrants, was proposing for Los Angeles a new and different symbolic alignment, in counterpoint to the great myth of the West.*

your place; if you couldn't eat a thirty-dollar dinner at an hotel without choking on the insults, being a great big 'Mister' nigger didn't mean a thing."

His narrative painfully acknowledges, here and everywhere, his simultaneous involvement in two great – and mutually exclusive – "American" myths: on the one hand, the "universal" patriotic myth of democracy, individualism, and equal opportunity, and on the other, the white myth of the Negro's racial inferiority. The result of this intolerable bind is the irrational, unstable anger that dominates Bob Jones and the novel.

## MOBILITY, ACCESS, AND EXCLUSION

*If He Hollers Let Him Go*, then, addresses quite precisely the impossible contradictions implicit in the term "black American" – at a time (the 1940s) and in a community (Los Angeles) where possibilities might have seemed to be opening. In fact Los Angeles appears from the novel's outset to offer an archetypally American geography of desire and promise, of the untrammelled pursuit of dreams, revised for an automotive age.

Bob Jones, an appropriate American hero for the historical moment of the freeway's birth, understands his identity and potential freedom as inseparable from the physical mobility embodied in his car, the gleaming "42 Buick Roadmaster." "Every time I took the wheel" he thinks with pride, "and looked down over the broad, flat, mile-long hood I thought about how the folks out in Beverly couldn't even buy a new car now and got a certain satisfaction."

Bob Jones' mobility is genuinely extraordinary, made possible by the powerful machine and Los Angeles' suburban network of fast broad boulevards. His travels in the week of the novel's action trace a kind of socioeconomic and racial map of the city: the black community of Central Avenue; San Pedro's shipyards; white, working-class Huntington Park; Downtown, a seedy melting-pot; upper-crust Sunset Boulevard and Santa Monica; Alice's father's house in the "Negro West Side" at Western and 28th Street.

These high-speed, frantic journeys repeat another characteristic motif of other Los Angeles fictions, whose protagonists are unthinkable without cars and avenues (and later freeways; the literary drivers of Los Angeles are simultaneously apotheosized and parodied in Didion's 1970 *Play It As It Lays*, whose narrator Maria Wyeth finds navigating the freeway grid to be the technique of Nirvanah). Furthermore, as L.A.'s literary historian David Fine has pointed out, the mobility of other Angelino writers' characters presses – at least symbolically – Westward. It more or less deliberately invokes the final stages of America's western expansion, of Manifest Destiny confronting its terminus in the Pacific Ocean and dissolving in images of futility and ruin: the marathon dancers circling above the Pacific in McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, for example, or Monroe Stahr's unfinished beach mansion in *The Last Tycoon*.

But once again Himes deploys this motif differently. For Bob Jones, the way West – the great American migratory path of desiring dreams that swept him from Ohio to California – is even more ultimately ironic than for his white fictional co-travellers, since his participation in the legendary trajectory is curtailed from the outset by his race. Racism, in the novel and in history, operates very specifically through spatial exclusions, containments, and denials (as *If He Hollers Let Him Go*'s repeated reminders of Japanese-American internment insist); Bob's apparent freedom of movement throughout the novel is clearly limited, circumscribed by a well-marked enclosure of custom and law. He and Alice *can* follow Sunset Boulevard out to the sea like any other American adventurers – but at the price of harassment and a police warning to "get back where you belong and stay there;" Alice's father *can* live on the West Side – but only on the derivative "Negro West Side." In fact, Bob's driving becomes more frequently an act of frustrated rage than of freedom, exposing him repeatedly to the material devices of his constraint: stop lights, slow-moving pedestrians, police, the inexorable time-clock of his job at the Atlas Shipyards, serving in the white man's war effort.

*Continued on page 10.*

## "WRITERS OF THE HISTORIC WILSHIRE CORRIDOR"



The "Writers of the Historic Wilshire Corridor" lecture series coincides with the restoration of 38 vintage neon signs that once proclaimed the Wilshire Corridor as the cultural, commercial and intellectual center of Los Angeles. The series began in April and continues until the end of the year. For more information about the programs listed here, contact the L.A. Cultural Affairs Department at 213/485-2433.

### Lectures

- August 21** "Nathanael West, William Faulkner and Hollywood's Memento Mori" is a lecture by Dr. John Swift, associate dean of the faculty and professor of English and comparative literary studies at Occidental College. 11 a.m. At Farmers Market, Art Gallery, West Patio.
- Sept. 10** "Nathanael West's Use of Architecture as Metaphor" is a lecture by Dr. David Fine, professor of English at CSU Long Beach. 10 a.m. tour; 11 a.m. lecture. At Hollyhock House (Barnsdall Art Park).
- Oct. 9** "Women Writers in Los Angeles, 1920s – 1940s" is a lecture by Dr. Marilyn Elkins, assistant professor of English, CSU Los Angeles. 11 a.m. At Robert Burns Park (corner of Beverly Blvd and Van Ness Ave.).
- Nov. 6** "F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Cinematic Approach to Fiction Writing" is a lecture by Dr. Marilyn Elkins, assistant professor of English, CSU Los Angeles. 11 a.m. At L.A. County Museum of Art Courtyard.
- Dec. 4** "'Here I Have the Feeling I Am Francis of Assisi in an Aquarium:' German-Speaking Emigre Authors in Los Angeles" is a lecture by Dr. Cornelius Schnauber, associate professor of German and director of the Max Kade Institute for Austrian-Swiss-German Studies at USC. 11 a.m. At Farmers Market, Art Gallery, West Patio.

### Discussion Forums

As a complement to the lecture series, four discussion forums will allow participants to examine the life and works of selected Los Angeles writers in more depth. The discussion forums will be held on November 5 (led by Dr. David Fine), November 12 (led by Mr. Max Benavidez), December 3 (led by Dr. David Fine), and December 10 (led by Mr. Max Benavidez). Each forum meets 10 a.m. to noon, at the Department of Water and Power, Auditorium – Level A, 111 North Hope Street, Los Angeles.



# CHESTER HIMES, *Continued*



115 ROOMS—75 ROOMS WITH BATH. RATES \$2.00 PER DAY AND UP. WEEKLY RATES \$8.00 AND UP.

Art courtesy of Dunbar Economic Development Corp.

Postcard of the Dunbar Hotel

## THE WAY SOUTH

I want to close by suggesting one cultural or mythographic possibility opened, paradoxically, by *If He Hollers Let Him Go*'s nearly absolute and relentless denial of quintessential American dreams. The city's east-west axis, the alluring final stage of Manifest Destiny (whose broken promises provided the theme of most Los Angeles fiction of the 1930s, and whose mythic geography still reflects much of the class structure of white Los Angeles), was blocked for Himes as much as for his protagonist. He found this out in 1940 when he arrived in Los Angeles as a young writer searching for work in the film studios, following the examples of West, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald. Despite letters of introduction from Louis Bromfield and Langston Hughes, he was strikingly unsuccessful at gaining access to the profoundly segregated industry. (Thirty years later he recalled Jack Warner's conclusive dismissal at Warner Brothers: "I don't want no niggers on this lot.") As a result Himes moved north to San Francisco, then south again to Los Angeles, to the black neighborhood consolidated along and around Central Avenue. It was in the early 1940s a community defined and hemmed in by restrictive real estate covenants and other exclusionary urban policies, but it also possessed a well-established culture, still growing, vitalized by accelerating immigration and the war industry to the south.

In doing so, Himes, like other black immigrants, was effectively (and by necessity, not choice) proposing for Los Angeles a new and different symbolic alignment, in counterpoint to the great myth of the West. The westward road — Nathanael West's Hollywood Boulevard, or Sunset Boulevard winding past the mansions of the wealthy to the vacant Pacific — ended inevitably for the *noir* ironists in disappointment, disillusion, and sterile repetitions of modernism's wasteland. But the

way south — down Central, Wilmington, Alameda, and the other great avenues to L.A.'s busy harbor — led to something different: work, pleasure, family; a living, heterogeneous community. Bob Jones draws his only moment of unqualified pleasure in the street life around the Dunbar Hotel, and his recognition of his belonging to it:

Tia Juana pulled up in his long green Cat and parked in a No Parking zone. He got out, a short, squat, black, harelip Negro with a fine banana-skin chick on his arm, and went into the hotel, and some stud said, "Light, bright, and damn near white; how does that nigger do it?"

A bunch of weed-heads were seeing how dirty they could talk; and a couple of prosperous-looking pimps were standing near by ignoring them. Some raggedy chum came from the barber shop across the street where they had a crap game in the rear and said that Seattle had won two grand. The coloured cop grabbed him for jay-walking and started writing out a ticket; and he was there trying to talk him out of it: "You know me, man, I'm ol' Joe; everybody know ol' Joe —" Everybody but that cop, that is.

It was a slick, niggerish block — hustlers and pimps, gamblers and stooges. But it didn't ruffle me. Even the solid cats in their pancho conks didn't ruffle me. It wasn't as if I was locked up down there as I'd been just yesterday. I was free to go now; but I liked it with my folks.

Despite the vigor of this descriptive language, I don't intend particularly to romanticize the life of Central Avenue. The black community's cultural fabric was already beginning to fray in the mid-1940s; its neglect and deterioration became a civic scandal in the century's second half, violently claiming the attention of white Los Angeles in 1965 and again in 1992. Nor do I want to pose the nostalgic or essentialist suggestion that Bob Jones has a choice of "full" black identity that he somehow misses. Himes suspends his hero evenly between the claims of racial and national identity, and finds no middle ground.

But his simple turning away from the traditional orientations of the Golden West constituted a kind

of groundbreaking act, sketching the southern routes and corridors along which, later, a non-Anglo but distinctively Angelino literature might make its way.

The 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s produced Los Angeles writers like Oscar Zeta Acosta, Ron Arias, Kate Braverman, and Walter Mosley. With fresh eyes (and an accurate sense of Los Angeles' demographic transformation of the last forty years) they re-envisioned the city, not as the end of the line for an outworn American Dream, but as a locus of complex intercultural, international energies whose origins and trajectories had little to do with the old mythologies.

Himes, I think, was the first in fiction to begin the exploration of a re-oriented Los Angeles. In *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, he was presenting in narrative form the iconoclastic speculation offered three years later by the Southern Californian historian Carey McWilliams,

in his *North From Mexico*: that the oldest axis of the American experience runs north and south, that the course of Manifest Destiny is only a passing perturbation:

Unwittingly we have been bucking geography, not cooperating with it. With the lodestar being ever in the West, we have simply failed to change our vision and to note the natural contours of the country.

Prior to the settlement of the eastern seaboard by European colonists, the continent was orientated on a north-south, rather than an east-west, axis and it may yet be orientated in this fashion.

*If He Hollers Let Him Go* intimated for Los Angeles fiction exactly such a realignment. Half a century later the city's challenge remains, as Himes understood, the reconciliation of its opposed symbolic geographies — and the reinterpretation of its great past myths in light of the culturally complicated, heterogeneous present.

## FOR FURTHER READING



Photo courtesy of Los Angeles Public Library-Security Pacific Collection

Wilshire Boulevard

By Himes:

*If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945)

*Lonely Crusade* (1947)

Himes's first two published novels, both set in Los Angeles and concerned with race and exclusion.

*Collected Stories* (1990)

Stories from the early 1930s through the late 1970s, including several from the L.A. period.

*The Quality of Hurt* (1972)

*My Life of Absurdity* (1976)

Himes's two volumes of autobiography.

About Himes:

James Lundquist, *Chester Himes*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1976.

Stephen Milliken, *Chester Himes: A Critical Appraisal*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1976.

Gilbert Muller, *Chester Himes*. Boston: Twayne, 1989.

John Williams, "My Man Himes: An Interview with Chester Himes," in *Amistad*. New York: Random House, 1970.

About Los Angeles and its Literature:

David Fine, editor, *Los Angeles in Fiction*. Albuquerque: U. of New Mexico Press, 1984.

Fine's introduction and chapter on McCoy and Cain are particularly interesting.



# Humanities News

## Proposal-Writing Workshops Offered

Workshops are scheduled during August for people interested in submitting grant proposals at the Council's October 1 deadline.

### In San Francisco:

For Media Project proposals

Wednesday August 10 10 a.m. to noon

For Public Program proposals

Thursday August 18 10 a.m. to noon

### In Los Angeles:

Tuesday August 16 10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Wednesday August 17 10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

### In San Diego:

Thursday August 18 10 a.m. to noon

The workshops are free, but advance registration is required. Please call the nearest council office (415/391-1474 in San Francisco, 213/623-5993 in Los Angeles, and 619/232-4020 in San Diego) to register and confirm dates and locations. Please also request and read the updated *Guide to the Grant Program* before attending the workshop.

## Two New Grants Help Motherhead Expansion

Motherhead, the Council's family reading program based on children's literature, continues to expand to new sites in greater Los Angeles. Six human service agencies offering parent education programs are partners with the Council in making Motherhead available to low-income parents who want to become reading role models for their children.

Two new grants will help sustain the recent expansion of Motherhead, and will make possible the recruitment of additional parent education partners this fall.

The California Community Foundation is the latest foundation to add its support to Motherhead with a grant of \$20,000. The Foundation emphasizes community-based adult literacy and lifelong learning through its community education component, which was the source of the grant to Motherhead.

The Joseph Drown Foundation has renewed its investment in Motherhead with a grant of \$20,000. Active in the fields of education and social services, the foundation supports programs that help children at risk to remain in school inside functioning families.

## New Council Members Sought

The California Council for the Humanities will be selecting new members for its board in 1995 and invites nominations from the public. Members serve a three-year term, renewable once. A flyer with nomination information and a nomination form is included with this newsletter.

For additional copies of the nomination form, please contact the Council's San Francisco office. Completed nominations and requisite supporting materials are due in the Council's San Francisco office no later than Friday, October 14.

## Council Mourns Sister Magdalen Coughlin



CCH Executive Director Jim Quay recently reported the death of Sister Magdalen Coughlin:

Sadly, I must tell you of the death of Sister Magdalen Coughlin on June 6. Sister Magdalen was a member of the Council from 1984 – 1988, serving as Vice Chair. As president of Mount St. Mary's College from 1976 until 1989, she built the school into a national model of multicultural education serving a diverse student body. For me, she will forever be associated with the phrase "the common good." Sister Magdalen was the inspiration for the Council's common good initiatives and as an alumna served on the advisory committee for the Center for the Common Good. Her *Los Angeles Times* obituary quotes her as urging her students to become "engaged in the common good" and praises her for serving as a personal example of such engagement.

Sister Magdalen served on many boards and, as a *Los Angeles Times* columnist noted, the members of these boards each thought that she devoted her time unstintingly to that one board. We at the Council are most grateful for the gifts of leadership and energy Sister Magdalen brought to us. I know her presence and convictions were a great inspiration to me personally. The Council and the world have lost a great and good soul. We will miss her.

## Internships Available

The Council has a number of internship opportunities available for undergraduate and graduate students in humanities disciplines. Opportunities exist in each of the Council's offices. Interested students should contact Ralph Lewin in the San Diego office (619/232-4020), Susan Gordon in the Los Angeles office (213/623-5993) or Alden Mudge in the San Francisco office (415/391-1474).

## BECOME A FRIEND OF THE HUMANITIES!

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# CALIFORNIA COUNCIL FOR THE HUMANITIES

The California Council for the Humanities is a partnership of public and academic life whose purpose is to invite all Californians to a lifelong exploration of the cultures, the stories, and the values that constitute our most vital inheritance.

Since its creation in 1975, the Council has awarded more than \$12 million to more than 1300 nonprofit organizations, enabling them to produce exhibits, films and radio programs, and lecture series and conferences on topics of significance to Californians.

The Council also serves Californians with projects of its own. These include the national dissemination of a Scholars in the Schools program; publications distributed to libraries, scholars and the public; coordination and support of local and statewide coalitions; an initiative on the common good; and, in 1994, a community project in San Diego, a Motherhead pilot project in Los Angeles, a chautauqua tour commemorating Thomas Jefferson's 250th birthday, and a ten-city cultural diversity program series presented by the Smithsonian Institution.

The Council is the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities and is supported by grants from NEH, corporations and foundations, and by contributions from individuals. An independent, not-for-profit organization, the Council receives no state funds.

Major grant proposals are accepted on April 1 and October 1. Proposal planning grant requests, minigrant requests, and film-and-speaker minigrant requests may be submitted at any time. Interested nonprofit organizations should request a free copy of the updated 1992-1993 Guide to the Grant Program from the San Francisco office.

JAY MECHLING, CHAIR  
*Professor of American Studies*  
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